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Supplier Relationship Quality and Performance in (Agribusiness) Supply Chains: A Literature Review

Abstract
This literature review strives to gain an overview of theoretical frameworks used to analyse antecedents as well as outcomes of relationship quality, which is a core construct of research into relational governance of industrial buyer-supplier relationships. Given earlier findings that there is a lack of research into the performance impacts of relationship management or relationship quality, a special focus was laid on studies which include different kinds of performance measures. Furthermore, methodological approaches taken by the various researchers are closely examined. We derive some conclusions as to the state of the art as well as to potential future avenues of research in the field of business-to-business relationships. While generally, more theoretical integration and a consolidation of measures would benefit the disciplines, it is found that few studies exist which measure relationship quality, its antecedents and outcomes in agri-food chains.

1. Introduction

Long term competitive advantage is now understood to be a consequence of the success of the whole supply chain rather than to be dependent on individual firm performance only (Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013). Each actor in the supply chain affects, and is dependent on the performance of others. Following a strong trend of outsourcing (Dyer & Singh, 1999; Praxmarer-Carus, Sucky & Durst, 2013), industrial firms increasingly rely on external organisations to perform critical operations and this creates a greater dependence on the performance of the other members of the supply chain.
The relationship between buyers and suppliers therefore becomes a critical component of supply chain performance and is increasingly recognized by researchers and practitioners as an important source of competitive advantage (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006b; Eggert & Ulaga, 2010). With the necessity of closer collaboration, i.e., moving away from market transactions to more hybrid forms of governance (Williamson, 1985, 2010), emphasis also has been shifted to the role of trust and relationship management in an inter-organizational context.
This is reflected by a tremendous body of literature on "Relationship Quality" (RQ), which is most often understood to comprise satisfaction, trust, and commitment between partners (Athanasopoulou, 2009). The Journal of Industrial Marketing Management recently even dedicated a special issue on the topic of managing and developing key supplier relationships (Ivens et al., 2013). Aykol et al. (2013) also found that "Relationships between importers and exporters were the dominant field of research within importing […], with the thrust of research centering on behavioural interactions between international buyers and sellers".
However, as Ostrom (2002: 21) noted for research on cooperation and trust in a broader societal context, a "tower of Babel problem" may exist also for research on the preconditions and outcomes of RQ in interfirm relationships. This impression is supported by the number of variables collected by Athanasopoulou (2009) which were conceptualized by researchers as antecedents, dimensions, or outcomes of RQ. The dynamic nature of the construct of interest complicates measurement, which is reflected by the fact that some researchers view to be an antecedent, what others understand to be dimensions or even outcomes of RQ.

To make a step towards integration of the different conceptions, with this paper we attempt to complement Athanasopoulous' work by a) reviewing the theoretical strands which researchers refer to in their studies of RQ, and b) by focussing on studies analysing RQ from a supplier perspective as well as c) on studies investigating specific performance outcomes of RQ. Athanasopoulou (2009) found only ten out of 64 studies to analyse the performance impact, and furthermore, she found that research interest in this respect seemed to fade, given the fact that even in studies focussing on products and on the supplier perspective, more recent studies rather focused on the relational benefits of RQ.

The review carried out by Athanasopoulou also did not include studies in the field of agribusiness. Thus, a fourth contribution of our analysis is to show how research on relationship quality has been integrated into investigations on food chain governance. Here, a special focus was found on cooperatives.

Overall, our goal is to provide a clearer view on the theoretical underpinnings of RQ research and its performance impacts. It is important to note, however, that we are not yet able to provide a real integration of the different theoretical foundations of RQ, as was claimed to lack already for trust (Lewicki, 2006).

Given the high number of available studies on business relationships, this review is restricted to a) studies that have been conducted after the year 2009 or which have not been included in Athanasopoulous' review, and b) studies analysing the impact of supplier relationship quality or its sub-constructs (satisfaction, trust, and commitment) on the (buyer) firm's or supply chain performance, respectively. From these bricks, gaps are identified and directions for future research are determined overall as well as more specifically for agribusiness research.

After a brief review on how relationship quality is conceptualized in a business-to-business (B2B) context, we present the procedure of our literature review and then provide an overview on the theoretical references made by researchers in the RQ field. Following, we turn our eyes to the state of knowledge with respect to RQ antecedents and its performance outcomes (section 4) as well as to the methods employed in recent studies (section 5). In each of the sections, specific focus is given to studies conducted in the agrifood sector. We conclude the paper by synthesizing our answers to the following key questions guiding this literature review:

- What are the theoretical foundations of the RQ literature?
- Which performance impacts or benefits of supplier relationship quality <u>to the buyer</u> have been identified in the literature, i.e., what can a buyer who invests in better supplier relationships expect as positive outcomes?
- How are these performance impacts empirically measured?
- How are the concept of RQ and its antecedents and outcomes taken up by agribusiness research?

2. Definition of Relationship Quality and Procedure of the Literature Review

Relationship quality – conceptualization, definition, and measurement

Trust, commitment and satisfaction are the most common factors used (Crosby et al., 1990; Dorsch et al., 1998; Hewett et al., 2002; Schulze et al., 2006; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a). The dimensions and definition of the relationship quality construct varies considerably in the literature (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Holmlund, 2008). Recent studies defined constructs such as buyer-supplier relationship improvement (Lai et al., 2005), relationship sustainability

(Fischer et al., 2009), partnership quality (Lahiri & Kedia, 2011) or collaborative partnerships (Yan & Dooley, 2013). In the latter case, the constructs of goal congruence and communication intensity were analysed as distinct dimensions, while Lahiri and Kedia (2011) use five items to create their composite measure of partnership quality. Fischer et al. (2009) use the "traditional" relationship quality constructs of satisfaction, trust, and commitment, and include a third aspect, namely "positive collaboration history" of the partners. In the following, we briefly outline how the three main subdimensions are conceptualized.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction is an overall evaluation of the past and future outcomes of the relationship. Benton & Maloni (2005: 2) define satisfaction as "a feeling of equity with the supply chain relationship no matter what power imbalances exists between the buyer–seller dyad". It is a strong predictor of behaviour and arises from an overall positive evaluation and approval of the relationship performance against some comparison or standard (Scheer & Stern, 1992; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a).

Commitment

Commitment is a measure of the desire for the relationship to continue and the willingness to make an effort on the other party's behalf. Relationship commitment involves an expectation that the relationship will continue and the desire to maintain and strengthen the relationship. It reflects a willingness to invest financial, physical or relational resources in a relationship (Anderson & Narus, 1984; Dwyer et al., 1987; Ghijsen et al., 2010; Moorman et al., 1993; Wilson, 1995). There are several distinctions of commitment. Morgan & Hunt (1994) identify two types of commitment in the organisational literature, namely commitment that is based on identification and internalisation of the values of the partner organisation and instrumental commitment, which reflects an assessment of the potential gains and losses of a continued relationship. Jain et al. (2013) distinguish comparable categories of affective and calculative commitment, and Liu et al. (2011) use the terms calculative and loyalty commitment.

Trust

Trust is the most researched aspect of relationship quality and is frequently used as the central construct to assess the quality of buyer-supplier relationships. It is defined by Blau (1964: 940) as "the belief that a party's word or promise is reliable and a party will fulfil his/her obligations in an exchange relationship". It implies the belief that each partner will act in the best interest of the other (Wilson, 1995) and includes the expectation that the other party will fulfil their obligations and will not take advantage of the others vulnerability or dependence (Dwyer et al., 1987; Sako, 1992). Trust requires confidence in the others character as well as competence and capability (Mishra, 1996; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Therefore trust incorporates benevolence as well as credibility and reliability. Benevolence is the extent to which one partner is genuinely interested in the other party's welfare and is motivated to seek joint gains and credibility or reliability is the extent to which a partner's word can be relied on. This incorporates honesty as well as trust in the partner's performance. Bönte (2008) recognizes these different conceptions but uses a differing approach of measuring trust, in that a single item (to be answered on a 6-point scale) is used, but respondents were informed about what was meant by trust in business relationships before.

Procedures of the literature review

The search for papers for the literature review was conducted using standard catalogues such as Science direct, Web of knowledge, and additionally, AgEconSearch for agribusiness-specific papers. Since only few studies explicitly referred to the notion of relationship quality or close synonyms, we extended the search for papers discussing antecedents and performance impacts of its sub-dimensions, including satisfaction, trust, and commitment (see above). As stated above, only peer-reviewed papers have been included and the time horizon is extended beyond 2009 only for studies which have not been included in Athanasopoulou's (2009) review. This also means that a number of relevant studies from agribusiness, which are so far only published as discussion or conference papers, are excluded from our study. Although a specific focus is on the RQ outcomes, we also discuss its antecedents, since in some studies RQ is not measured explicitly.

Table 1: Analysis of Studies of Relationship Quality

Journal	Abbreviation	No. of Studies	%
Industrial Marketing Management	IMM	8	20%
Journal of Marketing	JM	6	15%
International Journal of Production Economics	IJPE	6	15%
Journal of Operations Management	JOM	3	7%
European Management Journal	EMJ	2	5%
International Journal on Food System Dynamics	IJFSD	2	5%
Journal of Business Research	JBR	2	5%
European Review of Agricultural Economics	ERAE	2	5%
International Business Review	IBR	1	2%
Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization	JEBO	1	2%
Journal of Management information system	JMIS	1	2%
Journal of Marketing Research	JMR	1	2%
Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management	JPSM	1	2%
International Journal of Management Science	Omega	1	2%
Management International Review	MIR	1	2%
International Journal of Service Industry Management	IJSIM	1	2%
International Food and Agribusiness Management Review	IFAMR	1	2%
Journal on Chain and Network Science	JCNS	1	2%
	Total	**42**	**100%**

3. Findings with respect to the theoretical foundations

This section reviews the theoretical approaches which researchers used to derive their hypotheses as to antecedents or outcomes of relationship quality. We systematize this overview by distinguishing into economic, managerial, and sociological theories and will show that these theoretical strands today are strongly intertwined. Not all researchers, however, make explicit reference to particular theories (Lahiri & Kedia, 2011; Sahara et al., 2011; Ghijsen et al., 2010; Masuku et al., 2007; Schulze, et al., 2006; Moura et al., 2003), and some rather touch upon them "in passing by" (Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013). In cases where

no theory was mentioned, we inferred, if possible, the respective theoretical framework from the literature cited by the authors when deriving hypotheses.
De Wulf & Odekerken-Schröder (2001) analysed the usefulness of seven "theories underlying relationship marketing" for the application in the context of consumer relationships. These theories namely are transaction cost theory, relational contracting theory, social exchange theory, equity theory, political economy theory, and resource dependence theory. With their in-depth review of these theories, they provide, to our knowledge, the so far most extensive systematization of theories used in studies on business relationships. The review we conducted for this paper therefore takes into account more recent developments and specifically focusses on the question how researchers theoretically deduce and empirically measure their hypotheses of a relationship quality – performance link. We therefore more strongly emphasize theories which were neglected by DeWulf and Odekerken-Schröder. These are namely managerial and sociological theories. Table 1 gives an overview of the studies attributed to the different theoretical strands.

Table 1: Theoretical frameworks applied in studies on the relationship quality-performance-link

Theories	Authors
Economic theories	
Neoclassical economic theory	Hernandez-Espallardo et al. (2012) Schulze et al. (2006)[a]
Transaction cost economics	Yeung et al., 2013; Hernandez-Espallardo et al., 2012 Srinivasan et al., 2011; Laaksonen et al., 2009; Fischer et al., 2009 Bönte, 2008; Fynes et al., 2005; Lai et al., 2005; Humphreys et al., 2004
Agency theory	Arcas-Lario et al. (2014)
Game theory	Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013; Fischer et al., 2009 Laaksonen et al., 2009
Managerial theories	
Resource based view	Day et al. 2013; Liu, 2012; Srinivasan et al., 2011; Laaksonen et al., 2009 Paulraj et al., 2008
Relational view of the firm / of strategic management / of competitive advantage	Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013; Day et al., 2013; Srinivasan et al., 2011 Zhang et al., 2011; Laaksonen et al., 2009 Paulraj et al., 2008
Contingency theory	Yan & Dooley, 2013 Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013;
Organizational learning	Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013; Liu, 2012
Knowledge-based perspective	Yang, Wong, Lai, & Ntoko, 2009

Innovation theory	Gellynck, Kühne, & Weaver, 2011; 2013 Wagner, 2010
Sociological theories	
Social / Relational exchange theory	Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2010 Paulraj et al., 2008 Fynes et al., 2005;
Power / Resource dependence theory	Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013; Ghijsen et al., 2010[a] Eggert & Ulaga (2010)[a] Fynes et al., 2005
Relational / social capital theory	Srinivasan et al., 2011 Carey, Lawson, & Krause, 2011 Wagner, 2011 Villena et al., 2011 Knoppen et al., 2007 Cousins et al., 2006
(Industrial) Network theory	Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013 Gellynck, Kühne, & Weaver, 2011; Deimel & Theuvsen, 2011

[a] No self-positioning – attributed to this theoretical framework by authors based on literature cited

Source: own literature review

In the following, it will be briefly outlined how the theoretical frameworks were related by different authors to the research on buyer-supplier-relationships. For reasons of complexity reduction, we group the theories together into economic (TCE, political economy, game theory), managerial (RBV, relational view, innovation theory, organizational learning theory, contingency theory) and sociological (social /relational exchange theory, social/ relational capital, network theory, power-/ resource dependence-theory). We admit that our attempt to find a systematic way of organizing the literature may seem too artificial or short-fetched for scholars deeply involved in specific theories.

Economic theory as a framework for research on relationship quality

Neoclassical Economic theory

Hernandez-Espallardo et al. (2012) refer to neoclassical economic theory (and TCT, see below) to explain farmers' satisfaction and continuance of membership intentions. Basically, it is argued that there is a positive relationship between price perception and both satisfaction as well as continuance intention. This is founded in the cooperative literature which postulates that cooperatives should pay higher prices to their members than private enterprises pay to their suppliers. Other authors also hypothesized a positive relationship between price and RQ, thus an indirect effect on propensity to switch (Schulze et al., 2006). They found that while current price satisfaction had no significant impact, while relative price satisfaction as well as long-term price satisfaction do significantly and negatively affect propensity to switch. So far, we did not identify other studies in the industrial marketing field which take into account the perceived price as an explanatory variable, while studies on B2C-relationships often refer to perceived price (Yu et al., 2011; Martin-Consuegra et al., 2007).

New Institutional Economics - Transaction Cost Economics and Agency theory

New institutional Economics refers to the role of transaction costs for the governance if transaction as well as for contract design. Bounded rationality and opportunism are crucial behavioural assumptions which distinguish this approach form the neoclassical view. These assumptions lead to the necessity to account for environmental and behavioural uncertainty on the one hand, and on the other hand have the consequence of contracts between parties to an exchange being generally incomplete. This puts business relationships involving specific investments at risk and therefore calls for closer coordination, e.g. hybrid arrangements such as contracts, or even vertical integration. Uncertainty is a critical driver of transaction costs (Williamson, 1979) and adds significantly to the supply chain risks. Environmental uncertainty occurs as a result of unpredictable changes in competitors behavior, technology, and consumer demand or market supply (Fynes et al., 2004). This can have positive and negative effects on relationship quality and it outcomes (Srinivasan et al., 2011). Specific investments may be in physical assets such as product and process technology (tools and equipment) as well as human resources involving specific knowledge and skills (Fynes, Voss & de Búrca, 2005; Humphreys et al., 2004).

Besides the classical authors in the field of transaction cost economics (TCE), i.e., Williamson and Coase, a number of empirical studies focusing on TCE and business relationships cite Rindfleisch and Heide (1997), who are among the first to operationalize TCE constructs. Among the extant studies which empirically analyse TCE with a reference to relationship quality, we can broadly distinguish those which take into account the whole theory (Yeung et al., 2013; Lai et al., 2005), and those which only refer to it when looking at certain aspects such as opportunism (Liu et al., 2010), uncertainty (Wei et al., 2012), or specific investments (Hernandez-Espallardo et al., 2012). Of course, there are also studies which only look at the direct effect of TCE variables on performance (Wong et al., 2011) and do not take into account relationship quality.

Yeung et al. (2013) employ the full TCE framework and focus on the individual and joint moderating effects of TC variables (specific investments and environmental uncertainty) on the performance impact of “supplier partnership” (understood as commitment, cooperation, and information sharing). A contribution of this study is its showing that environmental uncertainty does not affect the link between supplier partnerships and operational cost performance. Specific investment obviously is a better predictor of governance form effectiveness.

Yeung et al.’s study is conceptually close to Lai et al. (2005), who also adopt a TCE framework and analyse the contingent effects of transaction characteristics (asset specificity, uncertainty, and transaction frequency) on the link between relationship stability and supplier commitment to quality. However, as compared to Yeung et al. (2013), they identify a significant moderating effect of (un)certainty but no effects of frequency or specificity. Given that in this study, the dependent performance variable was quality and not cost, this may explain the differences.

Hernandez-Espallardo et al. (2012) analyse how TCE can contribute to explain Spanish fruit and vegetable cooperative members’ satisfaction and their intention to continue their membership. Specifically, they refer to asset specificity and opportunistic behaviour by the co-operative’s management and therefore to the offer of safeguards as a potential antecedent of satisfaction and loyalty. From a rather agency theoretical perspective the authors also investigate whether the possibility of performance evaluation affects satisfaction and continuance intention. A further variable included into the analysis is adaptation, which reflects the ability of the cooperative to adapt to the changing

environmental factors which the farmers face. Besides the direct effects of these four variables on satisfaction and continuance, which are all empirically supported, the authors hypothesize safeguards, performance evaluation, and adaptation to moderate the effect of price satisfaction on the dependent variables. Except for adaptation and price, the interaction effects are supported by their empirical results.

Fischer et al. (2009), referring to Young and Hobbs (2002) analyse the effects of regulatory framework (e.g., existence of chain-wide traceability systems) and contractual arrangements on relationship sustainability and find that relationship sustainability is "largely independent of the adopted contract type", but that with informal contracts, key people in the companies as well as an equal power distribution become crucial for long-term collaboration (this refers to sociological theories of power dependence and relational capital, see below). The existence of a chain-wide traceability system had no impact on relationship sustainability in their study, which is mainly attributed to the legal framework that requires mandatory traceability and thus requires no transaction specific investments which contribute to long-term commitments.

Arcas-Lario et al. (2014) investigate the impact of agency theoretical variables (information availability and control) as well as trust on farmer satisfaction with their cooperative. This latter in turn is understood to mediate the effect of these antecedents on membership continuity, very much in line with Hernandez-Espallardo et al. (2012). While all hypothesized relationships were found to be significant, the explanatory power of their OLS regression models is modest to low, thus representing only a weak support for agency theoretical arguments in explaining farmer satisfaction.

Liu et al. (2010) focus on means to reduce opportunistic behaviour in exchange relationships and show how calculative and loyalty commitment change with the duration of a relationship based on a cross-section survey with varying levels of relationship duration reported by suppliers within the household appliances industry. They find an inverse U-shaped pattern for the link between relationship duration and calculative commitment, while the supplier's loyalty commitment takes increases linearly with relationship duration. While this finding potentially could fit into the repeated game folk theorem (see the section on game theory below), the authors' finding that the two forms of commitment have inverse impacts on opportunism contributes to the literature but may be contested given the cross-sectional approach which makes it difficult to assume the causality the way they do. We argue that it may be as well possible that the higher the perceived risk of opportunistic behaviour by the buyer, the lower the loyalty commitment and the higher the calculative commitment. This would question the managerial implication put forth by the researchers, that "loyalty commitment is the most effective way for a firm to decrease its partner's opportunism" (Liu et al., 2010: 850).

Broadening the view from the dyad to the whole supply chain, Wei et al. (2012) furthermore show that both inter-organizational trust and logistics information integration have a positive impact on chain performance, irrespective of the level of environmental uncertainty.

Game theory

A very straightforward link of RQ research and game theory is the analysis of trust via "trust games" (Bönte, 2008), which are basically conceptualized as repeated games with a structure of the classical prisoner dilemma. Bönte (2008) empirically analyses the impact of voluntary and involuntary knowledge spill-overs as well as the role of proximity for trust between buyers and suppliers. They namely do contribute to the RQ literature with their finding that "Inter-firm trust between geographically close business partners is significantly

higher than inter-firm trust between distant firms." (p. 869). Although the author does barely make reference to this body of research, we see a clear link to (industrial) social network theory (see below, e.g. the work of Deimel and Theuvsen (2011). A link to performance is not analysed in this paper.

Praxmarer-Carus et al. (2013) refer to game theory in their justification for analysing the mediating effects of perceived distributive fairness in the relationship between perceived cost (earnings) share and satisfaction. Laaksonen et al. (2009) employ a trust game of pricing agreements to illustrate the benefits provided by interfirm trust in financially measurable terms based on a case study in the Finnish paper industry. Theoretically, they link their finding to the resource based view (Barney and Hansen, 1994; Dyer and Chu, 2003), stating that mutual trust can be a source of competitive advantage and also can substitute formal contracts. The managerial implication derived in terms of selecting trustworthy partners, however, may be a bit short-sighted given the dynamic nature of trust and the long-term process of its generation.

Wu et al. (2010) as well as Lacoste (2012) take up the idea of coopetition put forth by Axelrod (1984) and Brandenburger & Nalebuff (1996). Wu et al. (2010) analyse the mediating effect of supplier-supplier coopetition on the impact of buyer behaviour on supplier performance.

Schulze et al. (2006) make reference to Axelrod (1984) and his "tit-for-tat" model of cooperative behaviour when reasoning about the possibilities of trust creation, but there is no direct relation to their empirical analysis.

Fischer et al. (2009) in their analysis of determinants of "relationship sustainability" also refer to game theory, and more specifically to the "folk theorem derived from the theory of repeated games" which postulates that "In a repeated interaction, any mutually beneficial outcome can be sustained in an equilibrium" (Kandori, 2006). They therefore include "positive collaboration history" as an additional aspect into their relationship sustainability measure.

Managerial theories as frameworks for research on relationship quality

As Dodgson (1993) states for the case of organizational learning, virtually all of the below described managerial theories tackle too complex phenomena to be attributed to a specific discipline. Scholars in the respective fields consequently often draw upon a number of different research streams, including economics, to develop their specific framework of analysis.

Contingency theory of organizations

Contingency theory basically assumes that an organizations specific situation (environment, size, strategy) will impact the organizational effectiveness (Donaldson, 2001). It claims that to achieve organizational performance, the organizations' characteristics have to fit its' situation. Actually, TCE also discusses such contingency effects, when analysing the relationship between uncertainty, specificity, and the transaction costs induced by different governance forms subject to these conditions. The relevance of accounting for contingencies becomes obvious also when observing the increasing number of studies analysing moderating and mediating effects. There is, however, little research that addresses the characteristics of the exchange partners and the effect of this on relationship quality (Wagner, 2010). Though the literature on new product development does identify the capabilities of the supplier in terms of technical expertise and product development capability and the supplier development literature stresses the importance of supplier selection.

Resource Based View, Relational View and Knowledge-Based Perspective

The Resource Based View (RBV) focuses on explaining how firm-specific resources and capabilities characterized by value, rareness, imperfect imitability, and non-substitutability form the basis of sustained competitive advantage (Barney 1991). A number of studies in the field of relationship quality view the ability to create trustful, long-term relationships as such a capability and therefore ground their study on this concept. Some of these studies adopt the notion of the Relational View of the firm, which was put forth by Dyer & Singh (1998). This approach basically extends the RBV of competitive advantage to embrace also the capabilities of firms within a firms' network (Dyer and Singh, 1998: 660). Conceptually, there are thus strong relations to the aforementioned RBV, and also to the organizational learning approach viewing dynamic capabilities and absorptive capacity as critical resources creating competitive advantage. But there are also links to sociological theories (see below) such as network theory and social exchange theory. Dyer and Singh (1998) themselves particularly refer to TCE (see above), as they stress that while relationships in markets are highly substitutable, partnerships may be not, due to relations-specific assets, knowledge exchange, the combination of complementary and scarce resources or capabilities, and "lower transaction costs than competitor alliances, owing to more effective governance mechanisms" (p. 662). These more effective governance mechanisms, in the view of Dyer and Singh (1998: 670), are self-enforcing, informal mechanisms, namely based on trust. The critical value of trust between business partners, however, was already integrated into the RBV before by Barney & Hansen (1994).

Among the studies reviewed for this paper, Inemek & Matthyssens (2013) fully adopt this view for their analysis of cross-border buyer-supplier relationships and their impact on supplier innovativeness. Further, Day et al. (2013), Liu (2012), Srinivasan et al., (2011), Zhang et al. (2011), and Paulraj et al. (2008) refer to the relational view. Day et al. (2013) specifically focus on the role of trust and, importantly, stress the fact that there is a potential also for negative outcomes of trust.

Zhang et al. (2011) identify strategic communication, professional knowledge and ability to reach compromises as three crucial capabilities of purchasing agents which encourage supplier trust formation. Despite their own statement of "Building on boundary theory and supply chain cooperation literature", there is a clear relation of their work to the relational view of the firm, which is supported by their citing Paulraj et al. (2008). These authors explicitly refer to Dyer and Singh (1998) and Kale et al. (2000) and analyse inter-organizational communication as a relational competency which is developed through ongoing exchange and is thus not transferable via markets. Paulraj et al. (2008) assume and empirically prove that communication mediates the relationships between the antecedent variables (long-term relationship orientation, network governance, and information technology) and buyer as well as supplier performance, respectively. Finally, these authors also refer to RQ in admitting that future studies should consider trust and commitment as antecedents of communication. To conclude, it has to be stated that a number of studies which position themselves in the relational view of the firm actually refer to the positive effects of long-term exchange which have been illustrated by game theorists, without referring to the respective literature (Zhang et al., 2011; Paulraj et al., 2008).

The *knowledge-based perspective*, as another "spin-off" of the RBV (Ketchen & Hult, 2007), specifically considers knowledge and knowledge management as a major source of competitive advantage. Yang et al. (2009) in this context analyse the impact of IT capabilities, communication, and knowledge management, on dyadic quality performance.

Only knowledge management was found to have a positive impact. The authors also hypothesize and empirically find a positive impact of dyadic quality performance on "buyer-supplier relationship improvement" which can be understood as a measure of commitment or long-term orientation. This hypothesis, however, is not based on an explicit theory. One could argue that their measure of dyadic quality performance represents a measure of satisfaction, given that it basically measures quality conformance. Then, their finding is in line with game theoretic as well as socio-psychological theories of trust formation.

Organizational learning and innovation theory

While RBV and Relational View stress the potential competitive advantages which can be generated through enhanced business relationships and the network of suppliers, organizational learning theory is more interested in how learning is performed and how it translates into the formation of capabilities. Dodgson (1993) accordingly finds that organizational learning cannot be attributed to one single discipline and calls for a multidisciplinary approach to understand the complex phenomenon. While early researchers such as Cangelosi & Dill (1965) had a clear focus on intra-organizational learning, the theoretical body has been widened considerably and now also includes inter-organizational learning processes. Liu (2012) in that context specifically addresses antecedents of relational (i.e., inter-firm) learning and the question how relational learning impacts relationship performance and capability enhancement. Their model also includes aspects which are discussed in innovation theory, namely the construct of absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) as an antecedent of relational learning. Analysing the moderating effects of trust on the link between relational learning and its antecedents, Liu (2012) contributes also to the body of research on performance outcomes of RQ, or trust, respectively.

Gellynck et al. (2011) and Kuehne et al. (2013) are the only authors positioned in the innovation literature who explicitly use the term of RQ. From their analysis of data from suppliers, food manufacturers, and customers in traditional food supply chains in different EU countries, they find three clusters of supply chains, namely chains with low, medium, and high innovation capacity. These clusters significantly differ in terms of trust, social and economic satisfaction, and reputation, thus underlining the strategic relevance of RQ and innovation performance. There is a close link of this literature to the sociological theories, namely relational capital theory, which is not explicitly mentioned in the publications by Gellynck et al. (2011) and Kuehne et al. (2013), respectively.

Sociological theories as frameworks for research on relationship quality

Social exchange theory / relational exchange theory

The social exchange theory dating back to Blau (1964) predicts firms to reciprocate their partners' behaviour. This is obviously related to the findings produced by studies based in game theory, which are reported above. Griffith et al. (2006) in this context analyse the effects of procedural and distributive justice on firm performance. As part of the relationship quality construct commitment is referred to as the desire or expectation that the relationship will continue. A long term relationship or relationship duration is therefore both an antecedent and outcome of commitment. Committed partners will make efforts to build the relationship and therefore affect relationship duration (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995). The longer the relationship continues the more experience the parties have and the more investment each will have in the relationship continuing and therefore the greater commitment they are likely to have (Crosby et al., 1990). Relationship duration will also affect trust, as more experience each party has with the other, the easier it is to predict future behaviour. This will also affect relationship satisfaction as a long-term relationship

develops familiarity and friendship (Granovetter, 1985). A long-term perspective to the business and to the relationship is a foundation that enables buyers and sellers to develop a collaborative partnership. It is the anticipation of future gains that provides the incentive for investment in specific assets and to forgo short term reward for long term benefits (Paulraj et al., 2008). Business partners also may avoid short-term opportunistic behaviour with a long-term perspective on the relationship.

Power-dependence theory / resource dependence theory

While in TCE, dependence stems from idiosyncratic investments, resource-dependence theory, which was specifically promoted by Pfeffer & Salancik (1978), postulates that power is obtained through the possession and control of resources that are valued by another party (see also Scheer & Stern, 1992). This theory is based on the general assumption of power dependence theory which was brought forward namely by Emerson (1962). Dwyer et al. (1987) and Paulraj et al. (2008) show that how each party in a relationship uses its power has a significant effect on relationship quality. Ghijsen et al. (2010) also can be sorted into this theoretical framework, despite their failure to clearly position themselves into extant research (instead, they refer to channel marketing literature). Their understanding of communication as a means of power exertion however refers to earlier studies and conceptual papers in the field of power-dependence theory. Ghijsen et al. (2010: 18) understand communication as part of supplier influence strategies and therefore as "a means to apply power". They hypothesize and show empirically that satisfaction is positively affected by indirect influence strategies (information exchange and recommendations) as well as (direct) promises, while it is negatively affected by direct influence strategies (requests, threats and legalistic pleas). Commitment, on the other hand, is strengthened by promises as well as human- and capital-specific supplier development.

Eggert & Ulaga (2010) discuss the contingent effects of dependence and customer share on the optimal strategy of business development and thus also can clearly be attributed to this research stream, despite an own clear statement as to the theoretical framework. They contribute considerably to this research in analysing the differential impacts of customer value and customer share on benevolence and credibility as measures of trust, as well as the impact of these trust dimensions on search for alternatives.

In the field of agribusiness, Batt (2003) analysed the performance of the Vietnamese potato supply chain and found significant impacts of trust on the effectiveness of exchanges. His case study however also points at the relevance of power and dependence between supply chain partners, where stronger power asymmetries between partners can be detrimental to trust and performance.

Relational / Social capital theory; Social / industrial network theory

Network theory relates to the Granovetterian view of embeddedness (Dyer & Singh, 1998: 668). The potential benefits of being embedded in networks often are described by the notion of social or relational capital in a broader sense. Carey et al. (2011) as well as Villena et al. (2011) examine the impact of three dimensions of relational capital, namely cognitive, structural, and relational capital (see also Knoppen & Christiaanse (2007), Wagner (2011); Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998)) on buyer firm performance. Relational capital in this narrower sense can be defined as comprising trust, respect, and reciprocity or trust, obligation and identification (Carey et al., 2011). Carey et al. find important mediating effects of relational

capital in the link between cognitive capital and buyer performance.[1] While it fully mediates the impact of CC on innovation performance, it partially mediates the impact on cost performance. Another partial mediation effect of relational capital is found for the relationship between structural capital (social interaction) and innovation performance, but there is no direct impact of structural capital on cost performance. Additionally, taking a contingency perspective, they analyse the moderating effects of governance structures on performance and find complementarity of contractual and relational governance, thereby adding also to the empirical research on the link between TCE and relationship management (Poppo and Zenger, 2002). Knoppen & Christiaanse (2007) apply a framework of relational capital to the European food industry, arguing that the framework "is broad enough to facilitate the integration of the various approaches to behavioral IOAD [interorganizational adaptation] and precise enough to advance understanding of the adaptive process between supply chain partners". Referring to Christopher (2000) IOAD in this study is understood to be a measure of performance, i.e., as "the ability to decipher the environment and respond accordingly, or more specifically in a supply chain context, to respond to shifting customer requirements and manage unforeseen demand fluctuations". Using a multi-case study approach, they show that the behavioural (as opposed to the technical (governance) dimension of adaptation between companies can be split into the subdimensions cognitive, relational, and structural, which corresponds to the "social capital triad". While presenting a research model in which power moderates the impact of various drivers on IOAD, they conclude with the proposition that the presence of behavioral IOAD lowers the impact of power on technical IOAD.

A recent study by Schulze et al. (2014) furthermore found that the positive impacts of RQ may be restricted to those fields of cooperation, where low up-front investments are incurred, i.e., RQ can rather complement incentives for cooperation but not substitute for clear economic benefits.

Common goals and values are an important aspect of social capital and they are established in the literature as important facilitators of relationship quality and performance outcomes. Partners with shared goals and vision are likely to establish stronger relationships and more easily. These shared mental maps reduce ambiguity and enable information to flow more effectively and efficiently (Bernardes, 2010; Lawson, Tyler, & Cousins, 2008; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). They are more likely to experience rewards from cooperation and will reduce conflict. Yan and Dooley (2013: 539), however, found that "aligning goals at early stages of a collaboration process might be a double-sided sword", pointing at the possibility that homophily may foreclose important access to new knowledge due to reduced search breadth of appropriate solutions.

Another important variable for the creation of relational capital is communication. This involves the sharing of formal and informal information in a meaningful and timely fashion (Anderson & Narus, 1984). Paulraj et al. (2008) analyse the impacts of inter-organizational communication on both buyer and supplier performance. These latter are measured via the following indicators: cost, quality, volume and scheduling flexibility, speed and reliability of delivery, and rapid responsiveness.

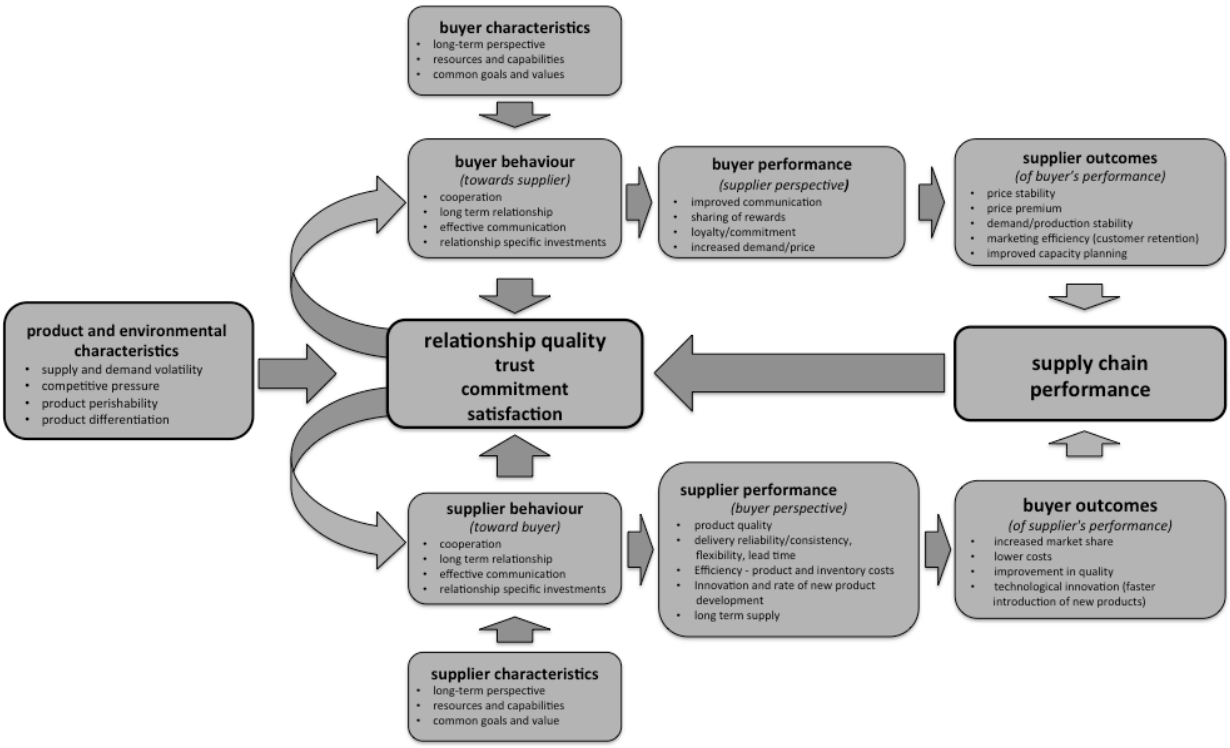
[1] Carey et al. (2011) employ a seven point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A very great extent" to measure performance impacts of relational capital in terms of "total cost improvements and lower product cost achieved with the supplier in the past 2-3 years".

Intermediate conclusion

As shows this literature review based on theoretical references, there is considerable variation in the literature on the antecedents and outcomes of relationship quality. Many studies do not identify the causes of relationship quality or investigate these from only one side of the dyad (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Lahiri & Kedia (2011) find that there is still a lack of knowledge as to the determinants of relationship quality.

There are however some consistent factors that are common to a large number of studies: specific investments, level of environmental uncertainty, effective communication and sharing of information, mutual dependence, perceived benefits and costs, shared goals, duration of the relationship and the absence of opportunistic behaviour (Han et al., 1993; Humphreys et al., 2004; Laaksonen et al., 2009; Lee & Kim, 1999; Liu et al., 2010; Yeung et al., 2013. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive but somewhat simplified overview of the links between supplier or buyer behavioural constructs, organisational characteristics, and environmental characteristics. RQ affects buyer and supplier behaviour, which impacts on firm performance and ultimately supply chain performance. The performance of the supply chain feeds back on RQ through satisfaction, building trust and commitment between the parties. This leads to a process of relationship development where the interdependence and risk taking increases between partners as well as the mutual rewards (Dwyer et al., 1987).

Figure 1: Antecedents and outcomes of relationship quality



Positive performance impacts of RQ are attributed to its enabling the buyers and/or supplier to make relationship specific investments and mitigate the risks of opportunism inherent in these (Laaksonen et al., 2009). These investments may be in physical assets such as equipment or tools or in human capital investments such as undertaking training of suppliers/buyers with specialized knowledge or providing technical support. These investments may also be in joint or cooperative activities that build social capital (Humphreys et al., 2004).

From the buyer perspective efforts by the supplier can result in improved supplier outputs in terms of quality, consistent and or flexible delivery quantity and timing, reduced or moderated price, faster lead times and increase rate of new product development (Han et al., 1993; Humphreys et al., 2004; Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013; Yan & Dooley, 2013). These improvements in supplier performance affect the buyers business and their ability to meet their customer needs. Improvements in quality, reduction or moderation of input prices, improved innovation and faster introduction of new products can lead to growth in sales volume and market share, improvement in price received for their products. These all lead to improved profitability.

From the supplier perspective the outcomes of relationship quality are the behavior and performance of the buyer. Increased trust and commitment on the part of the buyer mean more effective and timely communication, greater sharing of rewards which may be reflected in improved price or sales volumes. This may result in more stable demand and price or better ability to forecast sales volumes and price. This can lead to improved supplier efficiency, as they are able to improve production planning. Price may also improve through more equitable sharing of rewards or access to premium markets. Stable buyer relationships also improve marketing efficiency as it reduces the cost of finding and establishing new customers (Athanasopoulou, 2009). The improved performance and outcomes for the buyer and seller ultimately lead to improved competitive advantage for the supply chain as a whole (Laaksonen et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, there are also studies revealing negative effects of relationship quality on performance (Day, Fawcett, Fawcett, & Magnan, 2013; Yan & Dooley, 2013).

4. Findings with respect to methods employed in recent research

Data

The majority of studies use quantitative approaches to address the specific research questions. Data are collected mainly via mail surveys. In terms of measures, some influential authors in terms of scale development can be identified (e.g., Rindfleisch and Heide (1997) for the operationalization of TCE constructs), but there is still a tendency to relabel constructs (e.g., from RQ to relationship sustainability) and to develop own measures, which leads to considerable difficulties in the comparison of results.

Despite a number of calls for more longitudinal studies (Day et al., 2013), the majority of research published to-date still refers to cross-sectional empirical investigations, with Palmatier et al. (2007) being an exemption.

Furthermore, the one-sided character of most of the studies represents a major obstacle to knowledge generation in the field of buyer-supplier relationships. Matched data sets of buyers and suppliers are used by few studies, including Gellynck et al. (2011), Wagner (2010), Moura et al. (2003) and Day et al. (2013). Gellynck et al. (2011) are, as far as we know, the only study which comprises data from triplets, including manufacturers, their suppliers, and their buyers.

Qualitative (case study) data

There are some studies employing qualitative research. Day et al. (2013) follow a grounded theory approach and conduct focus groups and debriefing workshops as well as qualitative interviews with 68 suppliers of 2 focal enterprises to capture in-depth insights into trust generating mechanisms and the ambivalent impacts of trust on performance. Moura et al.

(2003) adopted a qualitative approach due to the huge heterogeneity encountered even when looking at the New Zealand meat industry. Knoppen & Christiaanse (2007) conduct six case studies in the European food industry and provide a comprehensive documentation of different dimensions of social capital, showing that qualitative approaches are specifically useful when addressing a rather under researched question.Other studies combine qualitative and quantitative research (Praxmarer-Carus et al. 2013; Liu, 2012; Lahiri & Kedia, 2011) and thereby increase the understanding of the practical relevance of theoretic assumptions and quantitative results.

Structural equation models versus OLS

In terms of methodology, recent years saw an increased use of structural models which were investigated using SmartPLS (Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013; Wagner, 2010), LISREL (Yeung et al., 2013; Lahiri & Kedia, 2011), or AMOS (Yang et al., 2009; Fynes et al., 2005). Liu (2012) is, to our knowledge, so far the only researcher in this field employing Bentler and Wu's (2003) EQS 6.1. The application of FIMIX-models, e.g., by Jain et al. (2013) enable researchers to account for unobserved heterogeneity in the samples and represent a valuable extension of the standard methods in the field of relationship marketing which have been (hierarchical) OLS regressions combined with exploratory factor analysis or principal component analysis (Schulze, Wocken, & Spiller, 2006; Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013, Yan & Dooley, 2013; Srinivasan et al., 2011).

Mediating and moderating effects

Researchers also have made more use of the analysis of moderating (Yeung et al., 2013; Yan & Dooley, 2013; Srinivasan et al., 2013) and mediating (Praxmarer-Carus et al., 2013) effects. Although Morgan & Hunt (1994) proposed trust and commitment to be "key mediating variables" between several antecedents and performance outcomes, the empirical research lagged a bit behind in this field. Relationship quality furthermore is used as a mediator in technology acceptance models (Chen et al., 2013) in the medical sector. On the other hand, Praxmarer-Carus et al. (2013) analyse the mediating effect of perceived distributive fairness in the relationship between perceived cost (earnings) share and supplier satisfaction with buyers' development programs, thus taking satisfaction, as a sub-dimension of relationship quality, as a dependent variable.

Some studies position their analysis of moderating effects in contingency analysis (Yan & Dooley, 2013; Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013; Carey et al., 2011), while others directly refer to the theoretical foundations of the proposed moderators, such as transaction cost theory, which underlies the investigation of the effect of environmental uncertainty (EU) and specific investments (SI) on the relationship between supplier partnerships and operational cost performance (OCP) provided by Yeung et al. (2013). Yan & Dooley (2013) focus on the effects of environmental uncertainty on the link between goal congruence as well as communication-intensity and project performance. Srinivasan et al. (2011) also found moderating effects of uncertainty, demand risk and supply risk on the relationship between partnership quality and supply chain performance. Hernandez-Espallardo et al. (2012) analyse, besides the direct effects of price, safeguards, performance evaluation, and adaptation on farmer satisfaction and membership continuance intention, also the moderating effects of the three latter independent variables on the link between price and the two dependent variables.

With respect to relationship stability, Eggert & Ulaga (2010) find mediating effects of trust and a moderating effect of dependence on the link between customer share and search for alternative suppliers.

Liu (2012) changes the perspective and analyses the moderating effects of trust on the link between learning intent, technological uncertainty, absorptive capacity, and cross-cultural differences on relational learning, which in turn is understood to be an antecedent of capability enhancement and relationship value.
Carey et al. (2011) analyse the contingent effects of governance structures on the impact of social capital on performance.

5. Conclusion: Recent developments, practical implications, and future directions for research

Given the multitude of theoretical and empirical approaches, a synthesis is not straightforward. Ivens et al. (2013) have just recently (again) hinted at the lack of precise conceptualizations. With respect to our first question, we find that the research on relationship quality has interfaces with a huge number of different research streams, whereas integration still is lacking (despite some convergence) and cannot be provided within the framework of this review. Some authors however do not position themselves in any theory at all, rather referring to streams of literature, such as "channel marketing literature. While we postulate that a clear statement of the theoretical foundations and assumptions made in studies on RQ is of crucial importance for a sound derivation of hypotheses, we also perceive it as a general strength of this literature to embrace different theoretical streams which are seldom mutually exclusive but rather complementary. The trade-off between a better and more holistic understanding of business relationships on the one hand and complexity and lack theoretical clarity on the other hand should be addressed by scholars of this field.
Generally, social networks and social or relational capital theory seem to gain importance in the analysis of supplier relationships. It has been shown to have important implications for the transfer of knowledge, innovation and performance in supply chains (Kuehne et al., 2013; Lawson et al., 2008; Trienekens, 2013). The social network theory approach also enables an understanding of the effect of horizontal as well as vertical relationships, which are relevant namely in agri-food supply chains (Ollila et al., 2012).
Second, as compared to the finding of Athanasopoulou (2009), that there is a shift from performance outcomes of RQ to behavioural or relational outcomes, we can state that the number of studies taken into account here show a still high interest in the performance impacts of enhanced supplier relationships. Performance measures of interest can be roughly divided into operational variables such as quality, cost and delivery reliability and flexibility, and rather strategic variables such as innovativeness, or adaptability. To respond to the lack of measures, Kim et al. (2010) developed a performance assessment framework for supply chain partnerships which includes both tangible and intangible performance as well as both efforts and results. However, relational outcomes such as continuance or a (general or specific) cooperation intention play a crucial role namely in agribusiness research, which leads us to postulate an increased focus on the actual performance impact for agribusiness research. It must be very clear that relational aspects can only be seen as important contributors to competitive advantage, as postulated by the relational / resource based view, when performance impacts can be identified. A potential means to address this issue may be choice experiments to elicit the impact of high RQ on, e.g., contract choice (Lauenstein, 2012).

If research on RQ is to be influential for practice, more research on relationship management effectiveness (Kang et al., 2013), i.e., the analysis of actually employed measures and their performance in achieving the goals set by the companies, should be performed. This is even more important since the formerly rather uncontested postulate of positive effects from good business relationships is more and more put into question. A number of studies show U-shaped relationships between relationship quality (or its subdimensions) and performance, calling for a more differentiated approaches to analyse the potential benefits of supplier development and relationship management schemes. The tendency to employ more moderating effects, which can be observed in the reviewed studies, will help to improve this shortcoming of earlier studies.

This is directly linked to another challenge for studies on business relationships: the prevailing use of cross-sectional data, which is in sharp contrast to the inherently dynamic nature of the research object is mentioned by virtually all studies in the field, but so far has yielded few response. Reasons may lie in the difficulty of finding both funds and volunteers among companies to carry out longitudinal studies. Some authors claim that a sufficient variance in terms of relationship duration might at least provide insights into the effects of relationship lifecycles (Wagner, 2011).

Problems may also arise in the studies with respect to the frequent use of self-assessed performance measures, which may lack validity and be subject to either biased perceptions or social desirability effects. This of course also holds for the information provided on relationship quality and its antecedents. More recent studies explicitly address the problems of Common Method Variance, which is a first step towards better validity of results, but the problem of valid measures still remains a challenge.

Differing from the earlier review by Athanasopoulou, it should be noted that we also found a considerable amount of studies taking a supplier perspective. Since we mainly focused on this type of studies, however, we cannot make any comparisons as to the relative importance of the two foci. Interestingly, we also found studies which analysed matched data of dyads or even triads. This seems to be a very important avenue of future research.

To conclude, besides the integration of theoretical frameworks, consolidation of measures and acquisition of better (dyadic, longitudinal) data will be important to validate earlier results of research on relationship quality. Future research however should also focus on so far under researched questions, such as mechanisms and conditions of trust recovery (Haselhuhn et al., 2010), the relevance of social capital in determining positive and negative outcomes of strong business relationships, and the effectiveness of concrete measures of relationship management (Kang et al., 2013). While we found some studies specifically focusing on cross-border-relationships, we agree with Aykola et al. (2013) that “research is lacking on managerial attitudes toward initiating, developing, and ceasing import activities.” and would extent this claim for more socio-psychological research to the analysis of all kinds of business relationships.

Methodological, choice experiments may be one way to improve the insights into behavioural responses to relationship management. Furthermore, qualitative research, which was underrepresented among the studies collected for our review can significantly contribute to understanding of the complex phenomenon of business relationships. Factors which may hinder a growth in availability of qualitative results could be a generally limited access of qualitative research to high-rank journals, which lowers the incentives for this kind of research, but also to the quality of the research and its documentation. Should these problems prove to be real, they should be addressed with appropriate measures of changing journal policies, and educational measures, respectively.

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